

Struggle to Serve Two Masters
A Study of the German Evangelical Church and the
National Socialist State

A Senior Honors Thesis

By

Mark Andrew Denton

Submitted to the Office of Honors Programs
& Academic Scholarships
Texas A&M University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE
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History & Political Science Group

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ABSTRACT

The Struggle to Serve Two Masters

A Study of the German Evangelical Church and the

National Socialist State

Research Fellows. (April 2002)

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The formation of the German Evangelical Church in 1933 coincided with the seizure of power by the Nazi party under Adolf Hitler. The relationship between the Nazi state and the German Evangelical was dominated by Hitler's efforts to dominate all of German society through his policy of *Gleichshaltung* (coordination). Inside the German Evangelical Church a struggle raged between the German Christian movement and the Confessing Church to determine the relationship between church and state. The German Christians, under the *Volkeskirche* (people's church) concept, believed that the German Evangelical Church should become the spiritual foundations to Nazi ideology and policy. The church and state should work closely together under their new leader, Hitler. The Confessing Church, believing that the church was under obligation only to Christ, fought to keep the state from dominating the German Evangelical Church and the Nazi state from dominating all of German society.

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Introduction

In 1933 Adolf Hitler seized power by appealing to a population weary of the Depression. He promised to break the so- called shackles of Versailles and to renew the German spirit degenerating under the liberal regime of Weimar. To bring forth this new German vision, Hitler believed he had to coordinate all of Germany to achieve his plans. *Gleichshaltung* (coordination) called for the removal of all foreign and hostile voices to the Nazi's policy from the army, civil service, society, and the churches. Hitler was able to implement *Gleichshaltung* with minimal resistance by destroying all other political parties, the repressing of dissident voices, and by rallying a German population around the concept of the *Volk* (people), which he claimed was being repressed by Jewish influence, modernity, liberalism, and Bolshevism. His policies were successful enough to rally Germany to support a provocative foreign policy to rid the shame of Versailles and ultimately lead to a German war of conquest (World War II). The only major domestic institutions over which Hitler was not able to claim immediate control were the German Catholic Church, and the German Evangelical Church, which waged within itself a bitter church struggle concerning its relationship to the Nazi regime.

The importance of the church struggle for Hitler stemmed from the fact that over 95% of Germans were members of either the Catholic or German Evangelical Churches. Pastor Stewart W. Herman, Jr., who served as the minister at the American consulate in Berlin before the war, pointed out that, "It is a curious fact that there are still more

This thesis follows the style and format of the Journal of Church History

Germans who believe in God than there are Nazis who believe in Hitler- or in Hitler's God... That leaves 98.5 per cent who commit themselves to faith in God. Except in the case of the Austrian and Sudeten plebiscites Hitler with all his electioneering has never come out of a popular referendum with so large a majority."¹ The threat posed by the German Churches to Hitler's influence over the German people was immense. Its support or absence of support to Hitler could be a major factor in the success of Hitler's policies and would play a major role in the morale of the home front during the war. The story of the church struggle was Hitler's attempt to assert his authority over all aspects of German society while the German Evangelical Church struggled internally and externally to keep itself free from the Nazi's program to harness society to its will.

The internal struggle of the Evangelical Church centered on the question of what kind of church should the German Evangelical Church be. Should it be a *Volkskirche*, a church based on serving Germany and whose religious stance should be based on the new national movement controlling Germany? Should it be the traditional church holding fast to the Reformation Confessions, yet still dependant on the state for support to which it owed allegiance or should it be a free church based on the Gospels of Christ and the Reformation Confessions and be completely independent from state interference and concerned with preaching the word of God and ministering to all people, not just those of pure German blood? In studying the Church Struggle there can be seen a correlation between an individual's vision of the Church and the lengths to which an individual would go to either welcome Hitler into the Church (as in the German

¹ Herman, Stewart W., It's Your Souls We Want (Harper & Brothers, New York, 1943) 4

Christian movement) or to keep the Church free from the Nazi movement. It was this internal struggle that guided the German Evangelical Church's external struggle with the Nazi state.

Initial Reaction to Hitler

When Hitler ascended to power in 1933, the initial reaction from the Christian Churches in Germany was mixed. In 1931, Pastor Martin Niemöller made a radio address in which he asked the question: where is the *Führer*.² Niemöller, like many other Germans battered by a lost war followed by the rampant inflation of the early 1920s, was looking for a leader to unite and revitalize Germany. The nation had lost its sense of identity and needed a *fuehrer* to invigorate the nation with a sense of purpose, recalling the lost days of pre- World War One Germany. In the Church, Niemöller longed for the days when the Church had a privileged position in society and most pastors wished for the end of the Weimar Republic, an end to the liberal democratic government which failed to provide stability or purpose. The scholar Stephen R. Hayes pointed out the shortcomings of Weimar government when discussing the German theologian Friedrich Gogarten and why so many German intellectuals welcomed Hitler in 1933. "While Gogarten warned that to ground the state in the *Volk* would be to substitute the nation for God, his emphasis on the power of the state to ensure order and "force obedience," if necessary, appeared to justify totalitarianism. Influenced by

² Bentley, James Martin Niemöller 1892- 1984 (The Free Press, NY, 1984) 44

Luther's doctrine of civil authority, Gogogarten argued that the anarchic tendencies of Weimar did not allow persons to experience "law" in this realm as God intended."³

Not all of the German Evangelical Church welcomed the rise of Hitler; many saw in his ideology a threat to both the German Evangelical Church and to German society. Hitler's rhetoric and the Nazis' platform were anti-Semitic, and the desire to base the spiritual nature of the German people on the concept of the *Volk*, threatened the theological groundings of the German Churches. The Jewish Question was a vital component of the Church Struggle; because by striking at all things Jewish, the Nazis were striking at the foundations of Christianity. By making people of Jewish descent sub-human, the Nazis made the concept of *Volk* the principle of physical and spiritual existence to exclude any claims by Christianity that didn't proceed from the foundation of the *Volk* principle. After the Aryan Laws of April 1933, the pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer expected the Evangelical Church to speak out against the policies of the government. In an essay published by *Vormarsch* he said,

"1. The church must ask the state "whether its action can be justified as legitimate action of the state.... It will have to put this question quite clearly today in the matter of the Jewish question." ...

2. The church's second task, as Bonhoeffer saw it, was to help the victims of the state's actions. "The church has an unconditional obligation towards the victims of any ordering of society, even if they do not belong to the Christian community."...

3. What, then, was the third task? Here Bonhoeffer pushed the limits of what he believed he was

³ Haynes, Stephen R. Between the Times: German Theology and the Weimar *Zeitgeist* (Soundings, volume 74, NY, 1991) 29

personally capable of. He declared that when the church sees the state unscrupulously wielding too little or too much law and order, the church's position is "not just to bind up the victims beneath the wheel, but to halt the wheel itself."⁴

Bonhoeffer's position was unique in 1933 and his views represented a small minority of the German Evangelical Church. His voice represented possible active opposition to the government, and was viewed as the beginning of a resistance movement within the church to the policies that were to be enacted by Hitler in the following years. He also realized that *Gleichshaltung* would soon overtake the German Evangelical Church, which, in turn, might well tear the Church apart.

Rise of the German Christians

The German Christian movement within the German Evangelical Church mirrored the Nazi movement in the rest of society. The historian Doris Bergen described the German Christian movement's desires to improve Christianity in the light of Nazism, "“Through the National Socialist revolution... God had revealed the secret of the racial aspect of true Christianity first to Germans. They could no more keep it to themselves than the “discovery of the Copernican universe” could have remained “restricted to one country.””⁵ The movement believed in the elevation of the *Volks* and the destruction of all unhealthy and un-German elements within the German Evangelical Church. As early as 1932, the German Christians dedicated themselves to revitalize the church. To accomplish their plans, they declared war on Marxism as the enemy of God, warned the church of the dangers of alien Jewish blood, and an opposition to all cosmopolitan and

⁴ Bethge, Eberhard Dietrich Bonhoeffer A Biography (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2000) 274-275

⁵ Doris Bergen Twisted Cross, (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1996) 28

international influences with German society (Masonic lodges, pacifism, etc.). In Article Three of their program, they proclaimed, "Those campaigning as 'German Christians' have no intention of being the sort of political grouping usually found within the church up to now. They appeal to all Protestant Christians of German decent. The parliamentary era is out of date, in the church as well.... We want a dynamic national church (*Volkskirche*), which expresses the living faith of our people."⁶

When Hitler became Chancellor in 1933, the German Evangelical Church was in turmoil over the union of the 28 *Landeskirchen* into a true national church. The proposed union would bring together three separate confessions of faith and twenty-eight regional churches. Hitler's seizure of power and the initiation of *Gleichshaltung* combined with the close connection between the German state and church convinced many church leaders that a restructuring of the state demanded a simultaneous restructuring of the church as well.⁷ The German Christians saw this movement as a chance to elect the *Reichsbischof* of their own choosing who would be able to bring forth the *fuhrer* principle into the Church just as the election of Hitler had brought the *fuhrer* principle into the national government. Emmanuel Hirsch, a leading German Christian theologian stated; "If we build up our Evangelical Church in inner homogeneity with the National Socialist state, i.e. if we above all stress the leadership idea in it and correctly select and train the people who are to give leadership in it, then our Protestant church can become a truly German *Volkskirche*, i.e. a church which is loved by the *Volk* as its

⁶ Matheson, Peter, *The Third Reich and the German Churches* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1981) 5

⁷ Scholder, Klaus *The Christian Churches and the Third Reich Volume One* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1988) 281-282

own church and which for its part can move the *Volk* with its Word.”⁸ Through the new Church Constitution and the new office of *Reichbishopf*, the German Christian movement had the means to transform the German Evangelical Church into a *Volkskirche* dominated by the ideology of the Nazi revolution and their own movement.

The traditional church leaders were aware of the dangers confronting them as they began to write the new church constitution. They wanted the new church to be a federation of the Reformed and Lutheran Confessions so as to unite Protestant Christianity in Germany. The traditional church leaders didn’t want a church based upon the *fuhrerprinzeips* whereby the church had a *Reichbishopf* with the same power as Hitler held in the Nazi state. Heinrich Weinel, a leading church author wrote “that the *Reichskirche* be an Evangelical Church, a fortress of evangelical freedom and toleration; a great communion of faith in which all evangelicals would have a home with their separate confessions and with the traditions which have developed within them... The development of the Church must not be forced by the State nor by any other external compulsion.”⁹ Dr. Hermann Kapler, the chair of the church committee to write the new church constitution, said in a letter to the Prussian general superintendents on April 11, 1933 concerning the Nazi and state interference in the proposed constitution, “arising out of efforts towards a totalitarian state... to take over the church as well, so as to integrate it as a department of state into the totalitarian state, that is, the national state.”¹⁰ The

⁸ Hirsch, Emmanuel, *Die wirkliche Lage unserer Kirche* (*Monatsschrift für Pastoraltheologie* Mai/Juni, 1933 vol 22 *Das kirchliche Wollen der Deutschen Christen*, Berlin, 1933) 182-5

⁹ *Die Christliche Welt*, May 6, 1933 translated by Macfarland, Charles S., *The New Church and the New Germany* (The Macmillan Company, NY, 1934) 30

¹⁰ AEKU Berlin, Gen. III 17, Vol.3, 226 translated by Scholder, Klaus *The Christian Churches and the Third Reich Volume One* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1988) 302

committee for writing the new constitution for the German Evangelical Church was comprised of Dr. Kapler, Bishop Marahrens of Hanover and pastor Hermann Hesse of Elberfeld. They faced immense difficulties in erecting a German Evangelical Church uniting Protestantism without adding the difficulties that would result from government interference.

On April 25, 1933 Adolf Hitler appointed Ludwig Muller as his representative on the committee writing the constitution for the German Evangelical Church. Quickly the emphasis of the debate of the new constitution changed from creating a federalist constitution uniting three confessions under traditional church doctrine to the demands of Muller and the German Christians to introduce the *fuhrerprinzeips* in the church and erecting a church structure mirroring the structure of the Nazi State. The other three members of the committee agreed with the creation of the office of *Reichbishopf*, but disagreed with the amount of power Muller wanted the office to wield. The Reformed minister Weber voiced their objections when he said, “he would only follow the *Reichbishopf* in so far as the *Reichbishopf* followed Christ”¹¹ i.e. not the German National Revolution or the will of the *Fuhrer*.

The Constitution of the German Evangelical Church was proclaimed on July 11, 1933, which paved the way for the Church elections of the same month. The traditional church leaders were able to include certain articles that became the foundation of the Confessing Church’s later opposition to the Reich Church. The first article stated “The unalterable basis of the German Evangelical Church is the Gospel of Jesus Christ,

¹¹ Duncan-Jones, A.S. The Struggle for Religious Freedom in Germany (Victor Gallancz Ltd, London, 1938) 56

witnessed to us in Holy Scripture and brought to light again in the Reformation confessions" basing the new church on traditional Christianity in opposition to the German Christian ideas of national revelation and the *fuehrerprinzepts*. In Article Two (section three) support was given to the federalist tendencies of traditional church leaders in the new church, "The provincial churches remain independent in worship and confession." Muller was able to include in the constitution several articles giving the *Reichsbischof* more authority than was originally planned for the office and these articles would later become the foundation of his dictatorial rule of the German Evangelical Church. Article Five (section 1) states, "At the head of the church stands the Lutheran Reich Bishop," and Article Six (section 1 states), "The Reich Bishop represents the German Evangelical Church. His task is to give visible expression to the features of church life common to all the provincial churches and to provide a unitary leadership for the work of the German Evangelical Church."¹² With the traditional leadership and the German Christian views on the new church being written in the constitution, the side that won the 1933 church elections would be able to transform the German Evangelical Church to its vision.

The 1933 elections saw the election of the first *Reichsbischof* in Germany who promised to unify the 28 *Landeskirchen* into a true national church. The main opposition to the German Christians was the New Reformation Movement. The close ties of the German Christians with National Socialism led to heavy political involvement in the church elections. The Hitler Youth and the Nazi storm troopers (SA) campaigned

¹² Matheson, Peter, The Third Reich and the German Churches (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1981) 24-25

strongly for Ludwig Muller.¹³ The Young Reformation Movement tried to battle against the Nazi propaganda machine, but the government banned any public discussion of Protestant affairs. They didn't have a legal recourse to publish their message. To make matters more difficult for the Young Reformation Movement, Hitler stepped into the campaign. He refused to meet with the New Reformation's candidate for *Reichsbischof*, Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, and did everything in his power to support Muller's campaign.¹⁴ On the eve of the elections, Hitler made a radio broadcast in support of the German Christians. He said, "The strong state must welcome the chance to lend its support to those religious groupings which, for their part, can be useful to it. The evangelical confessions have, in fact, seen the rise of a movement among the church people, the 'German Christians', which is determined to do justice to the great tasks of our time by working for the unification of the evangelical provincial churches and confessions."¹⁵

Hitler's intervention on the eve of the church elections ensured the landslide victory of the German Christians, who won control of 25 of the 28 *Landeskirchen*, the regional churches forming the German Evangelical Church. Ludwig Muller was duly elected as *Reichsbischof* and quickly subordinated the German Evangelical Church to the policies of *Gleichhaltung*. During the Brown Synod of September 1933 (named because of the German Christian delegates appeared in SA uniforms), *Reichsbischof* Muller said, "The whole German movement for freedom with its leader, our Chancellor,

¹³ Macfarland, Charles S. The New Church and the New Germany (The Macmillan Company, New York, 1934) 37

¹⁴ Bentley, James Martin Niemoller 1892- 1984 (The Free Press, NY, 1984) 53

¹⁵ Matheson, Peter, The Third Reich and the German Churches (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1981) 28

is for us a present from God, given in a time of decision, when the enemies of Christ were doing their best to destroy our people both inwardly and outwardly. In the triumph of this German freedom movement we hear the call of our God, and it is our honorable and sincere duty to listen to this call and to act accordingly... The old has passed away. The new has begun. The political struggle in the Church is over. Now begins the struggle for the soul of the people,"¹⁶ aligning the church and its theological foundation to the Nazi party. Then the German Christian delegates passed resolutions binding the German Evangelical Church to implement the Aryan laws.¹⁷ The New Reformation Party walked out of the synod and its members began the fight against the Nazi influence in the German Evangelical Church.

Formation of the Confessing Church

The actions taken by the German Christians at the Brown Synod led to a flurry of protests by many pastors and theologians. The pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer asked in a letter to the theologian Karl Barth, "on behalf of many friends, pastors and students, to let us know whether you feel that it is possible either to remain in a church which has ceased to be a Christian church [because of the Aryan laws] or to continue to exercise a ministry which has become a privilege for Aryans?" He told Barth that many of his associates were ready for further action against the decrees of the Brown Synod and *Reichsbischof* Müller, "We have in the first place drawn a declaration in which we wish to inform the church authorities that, with the Aryan Clause, the Evangelical Church of

¹⁶ Conway, J.S., The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933-1945 (Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, New York, 1968) 48

¹⁷ Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer A Biography (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2000) 307

the Old Prussian Union has cut itself off from the Church of Christ... Several of us are now very drawn to the idea of a Free Church."¹⁸ By raising the possibility of replacing the German Evangelical Church with the concept of free churches, Bonhoeffer hoped to move the church away from government interference and the *Volkeskirche* concept (tying the Christian Church to the destiny of German Nationalism).

Martin Niemoller had his eyes opened by the blatant partisanship of Hitler in the church elections. He realized Hitler meant to subordinate the Christian faith to the demands of his policies. In an article in *Junge Kirche* in November 1933, Niemoller wrote, "We fight for a free church. The church must be independent from the state and from the pressure of all political powers. It can only serve the German people as it should if it declares the Word of God in complete freedom."¹⁹ Rallying against Muller's new national administration, he formed the Pastor's Emergency League. The Pastor's Emergency League replaced the New Reformation Movement as the primary dissenting voice to the German Christian victory. The pledge of the Pastor's Emergency League stated,

- "1. I pledge my self to exercise my office as a servant of the Word under the sole authority of Holy Scripture and the confessions of the Reformation as the correct interpretation of Holy Scripture.
2. I pledge myself to protest against any violation of this confessional stance with all the strength at my command.
3. I recognize my responsibility to do all in my power for those who suffer persecution because of this confessional stance.
4. Acting on this responsibility I testify that with the application of the Aryan paragraph to the realm of the church of Christ the confessional stance has been violated."²⁰

¹⁸ Robinson, Edwin (editor), Dietrich Bonhoeffer Selected Writings (Fount Publishing, Glasgow, England, 1995) 53

¹⁹ Bentley, James Martin Niemoller 1892- 1984 (The Free Press, NY, 1984) 61

²⁰ Matheson, Peter, The Third Reich and the German Churches (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1981) 38

The formation of the Pastor's Emergency League was the beginning of active Christian opposition within the Evangelical Church to Hitler's church policies. The League gathered the forces of opposition to the Nazification of the church by the German Christians. In less than a year 6000 pastors joined the League, representing more than a third of all German Protestant pastors.

The Pastor's Emergency League began protesting Hitler's intervention in the Church elections and demanded the removal of Muller from office. Muller responded by enacting a Muzzling Decree on January 4, 1934, to restrict criticism of the church administration. On July 7, over 3500 pastors of the League responded with a pulpit declaration that stated, "Where bishops teach, maintain or uphold what is contrary to the gospel, we have God's command to disobey them. No one should follow even a properly elected bishop when he is in error."²¹ The opening volleys of the Church Struggle had been fired by both sides.

The bishops of the three *Landeskirchen* that were not dominated by German Christians began working on how to achieve peace within the Church. Bishops Wurm and Meiser met with Hitler to demand the removal of Muller. They believed Hitler was unaware of what was occurring in the church and wanted to give him a chance to undo the harm his actions had caused within the church. Hitler accused the bishops of being traitors to the nation and the *volk*. The meeting encouraged the bishops to active opposition to the German Christians and state interference.²² Hitler told the opposition he couldn't dissociate himself from Muller because of the politics surrounding the

²¹ Bentley, James Martin Niemoller 1892- 1984 (The Free Press, NY, 1984) 83

²² Helmreich, Ernst German Churches under Hitler (Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1979) 158

Church's affairs.²³ By forcing Muller to resign, he would show weakness and his political opposition would rally against him. Martin Niemoller, who was at the meeting, realized Hitler was governed by fear and this insight gave Niemoller the courage to take greater actions against the Nazification of the church.²⁴

The increasing Nazification of the German Evangelical Church led to the opposition (the nucleus being the Pastors Emergency League) meeting at Barmen in May 1934. The Barmen Declaration was signed by 83 pastors and 55 laity from 18 *Landeskirchen* and proclaimed the need of the Church to return to scripture and the Reformation Confessions.²⁵ The Declaration attacked the German Christian's theological foundations in the German *Volk* by stating,

"We reject the false teaching that the church can and must recognize any other events, powers, personalities, and truths apart from and in addition to this one word of God as sources of proclamation."

Then it rejected the attempts to politicize the church,

"We reject the false teaching that the church can let the form of its message be determined by the ideological or political views which happen to have the upper hand at the time."

Finally, the Barmen Declaration protested government interference with in the Church:

"We reject the false teaching that the state has the right or the power to exceed its own particular remit and become the sole and total authority in human life thus fulfilling the task of the church as well."²⁶

The Synod of Barmen had two very important consequences for the Church struggle. It united the opposition to Muller's Church administration into the Confessing

²³ Scholder, Klaus The Christian Churches and the Third Reich Volume One (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1988) 41

²⁴ Bentley, James Martin Niemoller 1892- 1984 (The Free Press, NY, 1984) 86

²⁵ Scholder, Klaus The Christian Churches and the Third Reich Volume Two (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1988)140

²⁶ Matheson, Peter, The Third Reich and the German Churches (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1981) 46- 47

Church and it aroused foreign interest in the plight of the German Evangelical Church. The Confessing Church became a rallying point for pastors who saw the German Christian movement as destroying the Reformation confessions and the foundations of Christianity.²⁷ The momentum of Barmen led to the creation of the Council of Brethren, which became an alternative administrative body to the administration under Muller.

Persecutions and the Fall of Muller, 1933- 1935

Before and, increasing, after the Barmen Synod, persecution was aimed against the opposition in the Church Struggle. This persecution came from two distinct sources. First, *Reichsbischof* Muller used the power he had as *Reichsbischof* to remove dissenting voices from within the German Evangelical Church. Muller dismissed Bishop Wurm from his Wurttemberg *Landeskirchen* because of the support the bishop had given to the Pastors Emergency League. A radio address on April 14, 1934 stated, "The committee of the Wurttemberg Provincial Synod has decided to withdraw its support from the provincial bishop. The accusation leveled by his congregations is that the conduct of the provincial bishop has provoked disquiet among the people; above all, his relations with the notorious Pastors Emergency League have met with incomprehension... Bishop Wurm is no longer an acceptable public figure in the new Reich."²⁸ A public display of support for Bishop Wurm followed his dismissal from the Wurttemberg *Landeskirche*. "Whole church districts, diocesan associations, groups of Protestant Youth, the Inner Mission, the Hahnist, Old Pietist and Pregizer groups... partly in great petitions, and

²⁷ Scholder, Klaus *The Christian Churches and the Third Reich Volume One* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1988) 212

²⁸ Matheson, Peter, *The Third Reich and the German Churches* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1981) 45

partly in personal letters, their solidarity with the Landesbischof.”²⁹ The removal of Bishop Wurm was the first step in Muller’s increasing persecution against his opposition within the German Evangelical Church.

Reichsbischof Muller continued the attack against his opposition by requiring all Evangelical Church pastors to swear a loyalty oath to Hitler’s government on August 9, 1934.³⁰ The purpose of the oath was to divide the Confessing Church between the pastors who were willing to take a radical stance against state intervention and the more moderate members who would be willing to accept a negotiated peace to the church conflict. This backfired when the moderate Bishop Meiser saw the danger in introducing an oath of loyalty into the Church, because it would be pledging obedience to someone other than God. The oath refused to recognize a greater obedience to God over the claims of the Nazi government. Despite the success of avoiding taking the oath by the majority of the Confessing Church, the theologian Karl Barth (writer of the Barmen Declaration) was forced out of the University of Bonn and he moved to Switzerland.³¹

The second source of persecution came from the government of the Third Reich. Hitler appointed August Jaeger as the Cultural Minister and gave him the responsibility of instituting the government *Gleichshaltung* into the German Evangelical Church. October 6, 1934 Jaeger had Bishop Wurm arrested and dismissed Bishop Meiser of

²⁹ Scholder, Klaus *The Christian Churches and the Third Reich Volume Two* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1988)83

³⁰ Duncan-Jones, A.S. *The Struggle for Religious Freedom in Germany* (Victor Gallancz LTD, London, 1938) 82

³¹ Jaspert, Bernd (editor) *Karl Barth/Rudolf Bultmann Letters/ 1922-1966* (William Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1981) 78

Bavaria from his office. To ensure the dismissal, Jaeger placed the Bishop and his family under house arrest.³² The reason for these attacks was to rid the Wurttemberg and Bavarian *Landeskirchen* of Bishops who were friendly to the Confessing Church and install bishops who would place the two *Landeskirchen* under Muller.³³ As Jaeger was attacking Bishops Meiser and Wurm, the Gestapo removed Confessing Church pastors from their pulpits and placed the pastor Martin Niemoller under arrest. While Niemoller was under arrest, the Gestapo searched his house and confiscated the documents of the Emergency Pastors League.³⁴ It was only a popular outburst, both foreign and domestic, that led to the end of the first wave of persecution against the Confessing Church.

Hitler distanced himself from the German Christian movement because of the domestic upheaval his Church policies were causing. He dismissed both Muller and Jaeger for their failures in bringing the German Evangelical Church under submission to the Third Reich. By doing this, Hitler increased the perception of many observers that his intentions were good, but he was uninformed of the actions of his subordinates. An American observer, the pastor Stewart Hermann Jr., said in 1943, "Regardless of Hitler's own feeling for Christianity, the men who were gaining power under him were plainly determined to eliminate this "alien religion" completely if it persisted in refusing to

³² Helmreich, Ernst *German Churches under Hitler* (Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1979) 171

³³ Conway, J.S., *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933-1945* (Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, New York, 1968) 98

³⁴ Duncan-Jones, A.S. *The Struggle for Religious Freedom in Germany* (Victor Gallancz Ltd, London, 1938) 72

recognize the supremacy of National Socialism.”³⁵ By dumping these subordinates, Hitler appeared to the German public as a leader who truly desired peace in the church.

Also, Hitler removed his subordinates because of the foreign reaction to the church struggle. In 1934 the Archbishop of Canterbury told the German ambassador that the coercion against the Confessing Church was causing damage in English public opinion. The Archbishop was concerned about the new German Christian doctrines and the disciplinary measures against Bishop Wurm in Southern Germany.³⁶ Foreign opinion was especially important to Hitler in 1934, because he needed foreign loans to support the German economic build-up and foreign good will to pursue his diplomatic objectives.

On October 26, 1934, Jaeger resigned from his post and both Bishop Wurm and Meiser were freed. The immediate reason for Jaeger’s resignation was that on October 12th Foreign Minister von Neurath received a secret dispatch from the London Embassy, stating that Bishop George Bell of Chichester sought an interview about the persecution of pastors in the German Evangelical Church and that Bell and the Archbishop of Canterbury stated, “an early publicly declared break between all foreign Protestant churches and the German Protestant church led by the Reich Bishop was inevitable.”³⁷ At the same time many Confessing Church pastors preached sermons against the Church Ministry of Jaeger. From his Dahlem pulpit, Martin Niemoller spoke in October of 1934, “It is dreadful and infuriating to see how a few unprincipled men who call

³⁵ Herman, Stewart W., *It's Your Souls We Want* (Harper & Brothers, New York, 1943) 184

³⁶ Bentley, James Martin Niemoller, *the German Church Struggle, and English Opinion* (Journal of Ecclesiastical History, Vol. XXIII, No. 3, July, 1972) 268

³⁷ Helmreich, Ernst *German Churches under Hitler* (Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1979) 172

themselves “church government” are destroying the church and persecuting the fellowship of Jesus.” Then he compared the rise of the Nazi party with “the old story: a treacherous kiss, calumny and false witnesses, temporal and ecclesiastical judgment and the cross!”³⁸ Further undermining Hitler’s church policy; the Confessing Church called a synod to arouse opposition to Jaeger’s persecution, another reason why Jaeger was forced to resign.

The Confessing Church met in the Berlin suburb of Dahlem in the fall of 1934. Dahlem represented the high-water mark of the united Confessing Church. At Dahlem, the Confessing Church advocated a complete separation from the German Christian Reich Church.³⁹ Dahlem was the strongest protest against Hitler’s church policies during the church struggle. The pastors and theologians who gathered at Dahlem were determined to rid the German Evangelical Church of the German Christians and wanted government interference out of the internal affairs of the German Evangelical Church. At the same time, Dahlem planted the seeds of the coming split of the Confessing Church into moderate and radical branches. The Dahlem Declaration first attacked the failures of the German Evangelical Church under Muller,

“1. The first and fundamental article of the Constitution of the German Evangelical Church... has been, in effect, swept aside by the teachings, laws, and actions of the Reich Church Government...

2. The National Church pursued by the Reich Bishop under the slogan “one state- one people- one church” means that the Gospel is debarred from the German Evangelical Church and that the church’s message is surrendered to the powers of this world...

4. Propelled forward by the spirit of a false, unbiblical revelation the Church Government has punished obedience to Scripture and Confession as an offence against discipline.

³⁸ Bentley, James Martin Niemoller 1892- 1984 (The Free Press, NY, 1984) 108-109

³⁹ Baranowski, Shelley The Confessing Church and Antisemitism found in German Churches and the Holocaust, Betrayal (Erickson, Robert and Heschel, Susannah (editors)) (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1999) 98

5. The unscriptural introduction of the secular Führer principle into the church and the consequent demand for unconditional obedience has bound those who hold office in the church to the church government instead of to Christ.

6. The elimination of the synods has silenced the congregations and robbed them of their rights in contradiction to the biblical and Reformation teaching of the priesthood of all believers.”

Then the declaration listed specifically the wrongs of the Church leadership and the uselessness of the appeals that were made to the authorities, concluding that a state of emergency existed in the German Evangelical Church. To remedy the state of emergency the synod gave power to the Confessing Church to erect an alternative leadership to the one that was in power and to conduct the daily business of the German Evangelical Church i.e. the Confessing Church.

The Dahlem declaration ended with,

“We call upon the Christian congregations, pastors, and elders to accept no instructions from the previous Reich Church Government and its authorities and to withdraw all cooperation from those who intend to continue rendering this Church Government their obedience. We call upon them to abide by the instructions of the Confessing Synod of the German Evangelical Church and of its recognized organs.”⁴⁰

This radical stance by the Confessing Church hurt public support of the Confessing Church because the German public believed the Confessing Church had gone too far. As a state church, the idea that a church could withhold church taxes and set up its own church government against the church government supported by the state appeared as a contradiction to moderate members of the Confessing Church and neutrals of the church struggle. These moderates and neutrals began to look for new avenues to create peace in the church struggle. Otto Dibelius, a German pastor who had been dismissed by Jaeger and witness to the Dahlem Synod, said concerning the synod, “Fundamentally they are right, and their aims are right, but they have overshot the

⁴⁰ Matheson, Peter, The Third Reich and the German Churches (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1981) 49-51

mark... and yet it is good that such a decision should have been taken. It shows that the struggle is in earnest and that everything is at stake; sooner or later that will bear its fruit."⁴¹ In the following months Council of Brethrens were organized as the new administrative bodies for the Confessing Church, but indecisive action and a failure of unity led to a break-up of the Confessing Front.⁴²

Hitler distanced himself from Muller and Muller was forced to resign in 1935. Hitler had lost the beginning of the church struggle on two accounts: he wasn't able to institute *Gleichshaltung* into the German Evangelical Church through the German Christian movement, and his policies aroused foreign churches to protest the events happening in Germany. The genius of Hitler was that he learned from his mistakes and attacked his opponents in the German Evangelical Church through different tactics. He successfully distanced himself from Muller and Jaeger claiming all that he wanted was peace in the church struggle. To accomplish this he instituted in 1935 the Reich Church Committee to bring the German Christian movement under control and appease his opponents in the Confessing Church. Dr. W. Zoellner, a respected Lutheran churchman, headed the Committee and Hitler supported the new Church committee by admonishing Nazi party officials for intervening in the affairs of the church, appeasing the more moderate members of the Confessing Church.⁴³

⁴¹ Dibelius, Otto In the Service of the Lord (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, NY, NY, 1964)150

⁴² Bethge, Eberhard Dietrich Bonhoeffer A Biography (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2000) 393

⁴³ Helmreich, Ernst German Churches under Hitler (Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1979) 191

Removal of Church from German Spiritual Life, 1935- 1939

The announcement by the Reich Church Committee on October 15, 1935 stated, "Bound together by this common faith we exhort and request the evangelical congregations to support (the people, the Reich, and the Fuhrer) by their intercession, loyalty, and obedience. We affirm the National Socialist welding- together of the people on the foundation of race, blood, and soil."⁴⁴ Hanns Kerrl was Hitler's government appointee on the Reich Church Committee (also in charge of making the church appointments on the committee) and he used the committee to slowly gain the support of moderate members of the Confessing Church, control the German Christian movement (from committing radical and unpopular action), and to slowly bring the German Evangelical Church under the influence of the Third Reich.

Hanns Kerrl staffed the Church Committees with men who would inspire confidence to the majority of churchmen. The English observer, Duncan Jones, wrote, "The presence on them of men known to be true Churchmen, like Zoellner, encouraged the hope that by their means practical steps might be taken... to bring the Church into peaceful waters again, where it would be free to rebuild its shattered organization."⁴⁵ The first move Kerrl did was grant amnesty to all pastors who had been imprisoned by the previous church administration and restored church administration to what it had been before the previous church administration.⁴⁶ These moves encouraged the Bishops

⁴⁴ Matheson, Peter, The Third Reich and the German Churches (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1981) 55

⁴⁵ Duncan-Jones, A.S. The Struggle for Religious Freedom in Germany (Victor Gallancz LTD, London, 1938) 115

⁴⁶ Conway, J.S., The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933-1945 (Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, New York, 1968) 135

Wurm, Meiser, and Marahrans to begin pursuing peace. The bishops were able to pursue peace plans because their *Landeskirchen* were restored by Kerl and they were able to run their regional churches like it was before the Third Reich.⁴⁷ This was the first step in dividing the Confessing Church.

While Hitler appeased the moderates of the Church opposition through the Reich Church committee, he strengthened persecution against the radical Confessing Church members. Dr. Kerl persecuted pastors who didn't agree with the decisions of the church committee. In the absence of any other Church leader, Martin Niemöller became the spokesperson for the opposition to Hitler. In a sermon on Passion Sunday 1935 he said,

"Today all the bells of the German Protestant churches are silent, and at the same time in every divine service intercession is being made for the five Protestant pastors from Hessen and Saxony who have been taken away from their congregations and put in concentration camps in spite of the remonstrances of the Provisional Church Government to the authorities concerned."⁴⁸

Many stories of persecution could be told; but here are a few stories that show how the persecution of Confessing Church members slowly isolated them from their congregations and each other, destroying the opportunity for effective resistance.

The pastor Hermann Klemm of Burkhardswalde and Weesenstein was an early member of the Confessing Church and opposed Hitler's church policies. As a member of the Confessing Church he refused to submit his church taxes to his superiors and was removed from his church in January 1935. He was detained by the Gestapo and had to

⁴⁷ Frey, Arthur Cross and Swastika (Student Christian Movement Press, London, 1938) 166

⁴⁸ Bentley, James Martin Niemöller 1892- 1984 (The Free Press, NY, 1984) 114

fight a major battle to be re-instated to his parish.⁴⁹ The Saxon *Landeskirchen* led by a German Christian bishop was able to use the state (Gestapo) to remove a pastor from his congregation. The action forced the pastor to spend a year fighting in courts to come back to his congregation, instead of building a Christian community and fighting in his congregation against wrongful actions of the state. On October 23, 1935, Klemm was re-instated. His congregation in Burkhardswalde welcomed him back to his position, but he lost the support of his congregation in Weesenstein (even the mayor denounced him), further decreasing his ability to protest against the state's interference in the church.⁵⁰

The Confessing Church was also persecuted in the teaching of seminary students who would make up the next generation of church theologians, pastors, etc. Theological studies were done in the state universities and these very universities suffered severely under the policy of *Gleichschaltung*. As been mentioned earlier, Professor Karl Barth went into exile in Switzerland and he was but one example of the many university professors who left Germany, a turn-over that by 1938 55% of all university established positions had changed hands in the preceding five years.⁵¹ The Confessing Church recognized the need to have seminaries to teach students outside of the state's reach. The Council of Brethren (the Confessing Church's new governing body) of the Old Prussian Union established five preacher Seminaries, the first being the Reformed seminary in Elberfeld. Eberhard Bethge described the importance of these new seminaries:

⁴⁹ Jantzen, Kyle *Propaganda, Perseverance, and Protest: Strategies for Clerical Survival Amid the German Church Struggle* (Church History, Vol. 70, No.2, June 2001) 317

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 324

⁵¹ Gordon A. Craig, *Germany 1866- 1945* (Oxford University Press. New York. 1978) 661

"Now, however, a fundamental change had occurred, and the stepchild became the darling of the church. The severe crises within the university faculties and the regional churches forced the Confessing church to set up new preachers' seminaries. What followed was almost miraculous. Protected by their relative obscurity, the new seminaries were able to turn themselves into remarkable power centers of theology."⁵²

These seminaries were important for the Confessing Church during the Church Struggle outside of raising the new generation of church leaders. These seminaries became places of refuge for persecuted pastors. The scholar Eberhard Bethge demonstrated an example of Finkenwalde seminary under the seminary director Dietrich Bonhoeffer becoming a refuge for the persecuted, "At the very beginning of the third course Willy Sussbach, a young pastor of Jewish origin, was attacked by an SA group in the province of Brandenburg and badly beaten up. Bonhoeffer immediately brought him to Finkenwalde so that he could recover from his injuries and shock. He later helped him to emigrate."⁵³ The graduates at Finkenwalde and other seminaries would take over the parishes of persecuted pastors for limited amounts of time. It was important for the Confessing Church to have seminary students relieving pastors from their duties for weeks at a time, so as not to have the Confessing Church's pastors worn down by the church struggle and Gestapo pressure.

On August 29, 1937, the Fifth Implementation Decree issued by the SS National Leader and Chief of the German Police Himmler outlawed the Confessing Church seminaries. The decree stated:

"The position of the bodies of the so-called Confessing church, as exemplified by their long-standing practice of using their own organizations to train and examine young theologians in defiance of the institutions set up by the state... is likely to endanger the state's authority and welfare... the ad hoc academic institutions, study communities and the teaching, students' and examination boards set up by the

⁵² Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer A Biography (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2000) 420

⁵³ *ibid*, 540

so- called Confessing church be dissolved and all theological courses and study conferences under its administration forbidden.”⁵⁴

The closing of the Confessing Church’s seminaries destroyed the educational system needed by the Confessing Church to replace pastors who retired, defected from the Confessing Church, or were arrested by the Gestapo. Young seminary candidates were left with the option of going to a state university that was already a part of the Nazi *Gleichshaltung* and learn theology only acceptable to the Nazi state. The future of the German Evangelical Church was placed in the hands of the Nazi professors who ruled the state universities at the time.

Another attack on the Confessing Church began in 1933 when *Reichsbishopf* Muller had the German Evangelical youth incorporated into the Hitler Youth. The incorporation of the Protestant youth organizations into the Hitler youth was part of a larger process in German society, whereby all youth organizations (including the Catholic Church’s youth organizations) were incorporated into the Hitler Youth. Through this process, Hitler gained control of the education and extra-curricular activities of the children growing up in the Third Reich, thereby transforming society through the youth.⁵⁵ Dr. Arthur Frey described this process clearly, “The young people were gathered together in the Hitler Youth, where they are educated in the National Socialist world-view; and the future district-leaders are trained in the citadels of the order where they are instructed by teachers whom Alfred Rosenberg has chosen.”⁵⁶ The churches suffered drastically from this, because they lost the ability to educate and teach

⁵⁴ *ibid*, 584

⁵⁵ Bracher, Karl *The German Dictatorship* (Praeger Publishers, NY, NY, 1970) 260-261

⁵⁶ Frey, Arthur *Cross and Swastika* (Student Christian Movement Press, London, 1938) 178

the youth, the future of both the German Evangelical Church and the German nation. By distancing the youth from the churches, Hitler had the power to destroy the churches in the course of several generations, only World War II saved the churches from this fate. During the church struggle the incorporation of the Protestant youth into the Hitler Youth distanced the Confessing Church away from the younger generation and moved them ever more outside the mainstream life of the Third Reich and German society.

The Nazi state then outlawed the public speech of Confessing Church pastors so that opposition to the attacks on the Confessing Church was illegal, which drove the Confessing Church underground. Before the Reich Church Committee, Karl Barth had been forced into exile in Switzerland and many pastors had been imprisoned for their public opposition to Muller's church government. Professor J.S. Conway wrote concerning the Gestapo's attack upon the Christian churches, "In fact, the Gestapo were content to play a game of cat and mouse, maintaining their watch over suspected priests, taking notes of sermons, organizing house searches, summoning the clergy for interrogation, confiscating "hostile" pamphlets or publications, dispersing unwanted meetings, imposing prohibitions on public lecturing, and enforcing expulsions from the parishes."⁵⁷ These attacks resulted in the arrests of hundreds of pastors and many pastors were sent to the same concentration camps in which Jews, gypsies, communists, and other "enemies of the state" were imprisoned.

⁵⁷ Conway, J.S., The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933-1945 (Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, New York, 1968) 174

The story of the arrest of Martin Niemoller exemplifies how the limitation on public speaking and arrests divided and destroyed the Confessing Church. On July 1, 1937 Martin Niemoller was arrested and the official announcement of his arrest stated;

That for a long time Niemoller had been making provocative statements from the pulpit and in public addresses; that he had defamed leading personalities of the state and state measures; that he had caused unrest among the populace. Likewise he had urged rebellion against state laws and ordinances. His statements are the steady fare of the hostile foreign press."⁵⁸

Niemoller was sent to Dachau concentration camp and spent the entire war in imprisonment. The arrest of Martin Niemoller deprived the Confessing Church of one of its strongest leaders and destroyed the Pastor's Emergency League as a driving force in the church struggle. Added to his arrest, over 800 pastors were imprisoned for two or more days in 1937 and the Confessing Church struggled to keep pastors in the pulpit, much less opposing the Nazi interference in the German Evangelical Church.⁵⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer was banned from staying in Berlin and many other pastors were banned from residing in their parishes and even forbidden to speak at all in public.⁶⁰ Slowly, but effectively, Hitler had destroyed the public voice of the Confessing Church during the years 1935-1939. The voice of church resistance to Hitler's church policies was forced underground and had been removed from the attention of the German public.

Confessing Church's Resistance to State

The Confessing Church responded to these attacks by the state by using the 1936 Berlin Olympic games to mount protests against the state's persecutions and by declarations from the pastors' pulpits. The international attention to the Olympic games

⁵⁸ Helmreich, Ernst German Churches under Hitler (Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1979) 214
⁵⁹ *ibid*, 215

⁶⁰ Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer A Biography (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2000) 597

kept the Gestapo from overt action against the Confessing Church's protests and the international audience of the Olympics allowed them to publicize their protests to the international community. "The magazine *Christliche Welt*, at that time hostile to the Confessing Church, reported that the church committees' lectures in Holy Trinity Church, though highly satisfactory from a scholarly point of view, were being poorly attended while those of the Confessing Church, whose theological content was controversial in the extreme, were attracting crowds of listeners: "a huge, very reverently attentive congregation."⁶¹ At the same time, the Confessing Church used pulpit declarations and intercessory prayer lists for imprisoned pastors to counter the actions of the state.

The Confessing Church also used the ecumenical movement to respond against the Nazi persecution. The Confessing Church fought to keep its claims of being the true German Evangelical Church and this led the Confessing Church to demand sole representation of the German Evangelical Church at the ecumenical councils during the 1930's. At the Ecumenical Council of Fano, the Confessing Church pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer fought for the sole representation of the Confessing Church and was able to claim a major victory in the church struggle. The historians Rouse and Neill write:

"The biennial meeting of the Council at Fano... stands out as perhaps the most critical and decisive meeting in its history. Here the Council solemnly resolved to throw its weight on the side of the Confessing Church in Germany against the so-called "German Christians" and by implication against the Nazi regime."⁶²

⁶¹ *ibid*, 538

⁶² *ibid*, 381

The Ecumenical movement had thrown its support behind the Confessing Church, but it was pyrrhic victory. At later meetings of the ecumenical councils, there were disagreements on the representation of the German churches in the German delegation. After the Ecumenical movement had condemned the German Christian movement, they decided to take a less confrontational position in the German church struggle. The Secretary of Faith and Order, canon Leonard Hodgson invited delegates from the other German Churches. His position was that the ecumenical movement couldn't decide a national conflict and had to accept all churches that acknowledged Christ as their Savior.

At the Synod of Oeynhausen in February 1936, Dietrich Bonhoeffer finally spoke out against the divisions appearing in the Confessing Church. The more moderate members were willing to compromise with the church committee to provide political peace in Germany. Bonhoeffer spoke from the more radical perspective and said,

"Already, the concern for the survival of the Reich church has virtually replaced concern for the undisguised word of truth. Instead of going forward, we are standing still and asking who we really are- a church, a movement or a group? Whoever looks on the Confessing church as a movement or as the upholder of a cause is lost; all he sees is a wretched crowd of obstinate, despondent people barely worthy of the name "movement"... But he must not see us like that! By standing still we destroy the church, which can exist only by going forward. The way ahead is marked by the beacons of the synods: Barmen as a tower against the subversion of church doctrine and Dahlem as one against the subversion of the ecclesiastical order. Barmen holds the sword forged by the Word. Without Dahlem, however, Barmen would be like a weapon carelessly left in the hands of a foreign power's general staff. A third synod must now provide protection against the subversion of the church by the world which, in the shape of the National Socialist state, is intervening through its finance departments, Legislative Authority and committees, and is now tearing apart the church of those who confess. Here we cannot and must not give in one single time!"⁶³

The resistance Bonhoeffer wanted the Confessing Church to take was not what the majority of the Confessing Church was willing to follow. The moderates wanted to

⁶³ *ibid*, 499

keep the church strong in Germany and believed only by making peace with the state would that happen. Also, the arrest of Martin Niemoller in 1937 deprived the radical wing of the Confessing Church of their main spokesman and showed the willingness of the Nazi regime to silence their opponents in the church struggle through force. The arrest of Niemoller was the peak in a wave of persecution against the Confessing Church. Before Niemoller's arrest, nine Lubeck pastors were put under house arrest, an event Niemoller denounced from his Dahlem pulpit on January 30, 1937.⁶⁴ The Confessing Church of Prussia's official prayer list contained the names of 45 imprisoned pastors and deacons with 25 more under temporary arrest.⁶⁵

The increasing persecution of the Confessing Church finally led to an outburst of opposition by the moderates. After the arrest of nine Lubeck pastors, Dr. Zoellner was prohibited by church minister Kerrl from visiting the imprisoned pastors. The church committee realized accommodation with the regime wasn't possible. On February 12, the Reich Church committee resigned because the committee didn't receive support from the government and the government's persecutions made it impossible for peace in the church to be made.⁶⁶ By then, Hitler had silenced the churches long enough for him to make foreign policy moves that increasingly moved the church struggle to the sidelines. As Germany regained territory lost during World War I and began taking over non-German territories, internal church politics became less important. Hitler didn't intend to make peace in the church struggle, unless that peace meant the subordination of the

⁶⁴ Bentley, James Martin Niemoller 1892- 1984 (The Free Press, NY, 1984) 124

⁶⁵ Thomas, Theodore Women Against Hitler (Praeger Publishing, Westport, Connecticut, 1995) 21

⁶⁶ Duncan-Jones, A.S. The Struggle for Religious Freedom in Germany (Victor Gallancz LTD, London, 1938) 138-139

German Evangelical Church to the Nazi regime. Hitler said concerning the church question, "Once I have settled my other problems... I'll have my reckoning with the church. I'll have it reeling on the ropes."⁶⁷

Conclusion

Resistance ceased as Hitler took the country into World War II, since any resistance at this was interpreted as treason. To weaken the regime would mean to weaken the nation as it was fighting foreign enemies. The sense of duty to nation became vitally important in the final silencing of the German Churches. Even Martin Niemöller, imprisoned illegally by the Nazis since 1937, volunteered to command a U-boat (he had been a U-boat captain in World War One).⁶⁸

The Confessing Church and all German Evangelical churchmen who didn't support Hitler's idea of the German Evangelical Church lost their struggle with the Nazi state because they failed to unite and respond against the state's attack. The moderate members of the Confessing Church and the neutrals in the church struggle believed strongly in the concept of a state church and didn't want the German Evangelical Church to lose the support of the state, because if they lost the support of the state then they believed they would lose the support of the German people. Those German people who were neutral believed they were called to minister to and if the German people supported Hitler, they couldn't allow the German Evangelical Church to become overtly opposed to Hitler. Instead, they exhausted every possible recourse to make peace with the state. They joined Hitler's Reich Church Committee despite the earlier arrests of two neutral

⁶⁷ Speer, Albert Inside the Third Reich (The Macmillan Company, NY, NY, 1970) 123

⁶⁸ Bentley, James Martin Niemöller 1892- 1984 (The Free Press, NY, 1984) 144-147

bishops and persecution against numerous pastors who refused to support the German Christians. They failed to protest Hitler's increasing persecution of the Confessing Church. Hitler would constantly dangle the possibility of peace in the church struggle, because he knew that neutral Germans would follow him until it became absolutely apparent that the only acceptable church for Hitler was a Nazi church, not the Christian conception of church. Only after wave after wave of persecution against Hitler's opponents within the German Evangelical Church, did the moderates take action to publicly protest Hitler's church policies. By then, Hitler had taken the country into a provocative foreign policy and the eyes of the German people were on foreign affairs that were leading closer and closer to war, not the German church struggle.

Despite the support Hitler had earlier given to the German Christian movement, the movement didn't succeed in garnering the support of the population. The radical stance made by the German Christian movement at the Brown Synod in 1933 destroyed the earlier popular support the movement had through its connection to the Nazi movement. Its use of persecution and the resistance formed to fight against their persecution made the movement a political liability to Hitler and he wisely distanced himself from the movement. After the dismissal of *Reichsbischof* Müller, the movement stagnated until it ended with the fall of the Third Reich in 1945. It still retained considerable support from its radical base of members who wanted to transform the German Evangelical Church into a Nazi *Volkeskirche*, yet it had lost all support from moderate and neutral Germans. More important it had lost its most influential supporter, Adolf Hitler.

The radical members of the Confessing Church failed because they couldn't garner the popular support against Hitler as long as the neutrals publicly supported Hitler's attempts at peace in the church struggle. Without the threat of united church action, Hitler was able to isolate and weaken the radicals of the Confessing Church, slowly tightening his grip on the German Evangelical Church. The Confessing Church would publicly protest against Hitler's actions, but each time they protested they suffered reprisals, which decimated their leadership and intimidated their base of support. In 1935, when the Confessing Church and the moderate churchmen joined together to protest against the policies of Jaeger and Muller, they forced Hitler to dismiss his subordinates and to change his stance concerning the future of the German Evangelical Church. Yet, they failed to stay united, allowing Hitler to change tactics but not his final goals for the church further dividing the moderate churchmen and the Confessing Church. The Confessing Church saw the danger in a governmental committee solving the church conflict, but its stance became more and more radical. Its belief in a free church went against the structure of German Protestant Christianity since the days of the Treaty of Augsburg in the 16th century (where the ruler of a individual German state chose the Christian denomination of his land). The Confessing Church's stance, in the words of Otto Dibelius, "Fundamentally they [the Confessing Church] are right, and their aims are right, but they have overshot the mark."⁶⁹ At the same time, the state persecution against the Confessing Church never allowed the Confessing Church the opportunity to explain its theology or its goals. Instead the government control of

⁶⁹ Dibelius, Otto In the Service of the Lord (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, NY, NY, 1964) 150

the press, the silencing of pastors through intimidation or arrest, and the government prohibition against its educational faculties isolated the Confessing Church from mainstream German society, making its radical stance appear in an even more radical light.

It was Hitler's ability to divide his opponents in the German Evangelical Church that allowed him to silence the German Evangelical Church and gain complete control over a predominantly Christian nation. In his relationship with the German Christians, he used the movement to implement his policies within the German Evangelical Church. Yet, when he realized the failure of this policy, he was able to distance himself from his subordinates, allowing the blame to fall on them while Hitler appeared to have good intentions (just being misinformed). He was able to dangle the promise of peace in the church struggle to the moderate and neutral churchmen, who desired above all to prevent a break between church and state. While doing this, he was able to paint the Confessing Church as a radical movement who wanted to destroy the traditional church-state relationship of German Protestant Christianity and involved in using foreign enemies (the ecumenical movement was based primarily in England) to try to influence the German people and intimidate the German government. This movement also operated illegal seminaries, made hostile speeches against the government, and was out of step with the Nazi revolution revitalizing German society. Hitler was the winner of the church struggle, because he was able to force the German Evangelical Church to attempt to serve two masters, himself and God, despite the fact that the God of the Christian religion was the anti-thesis of the *fuehrer* of the New Germany.

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